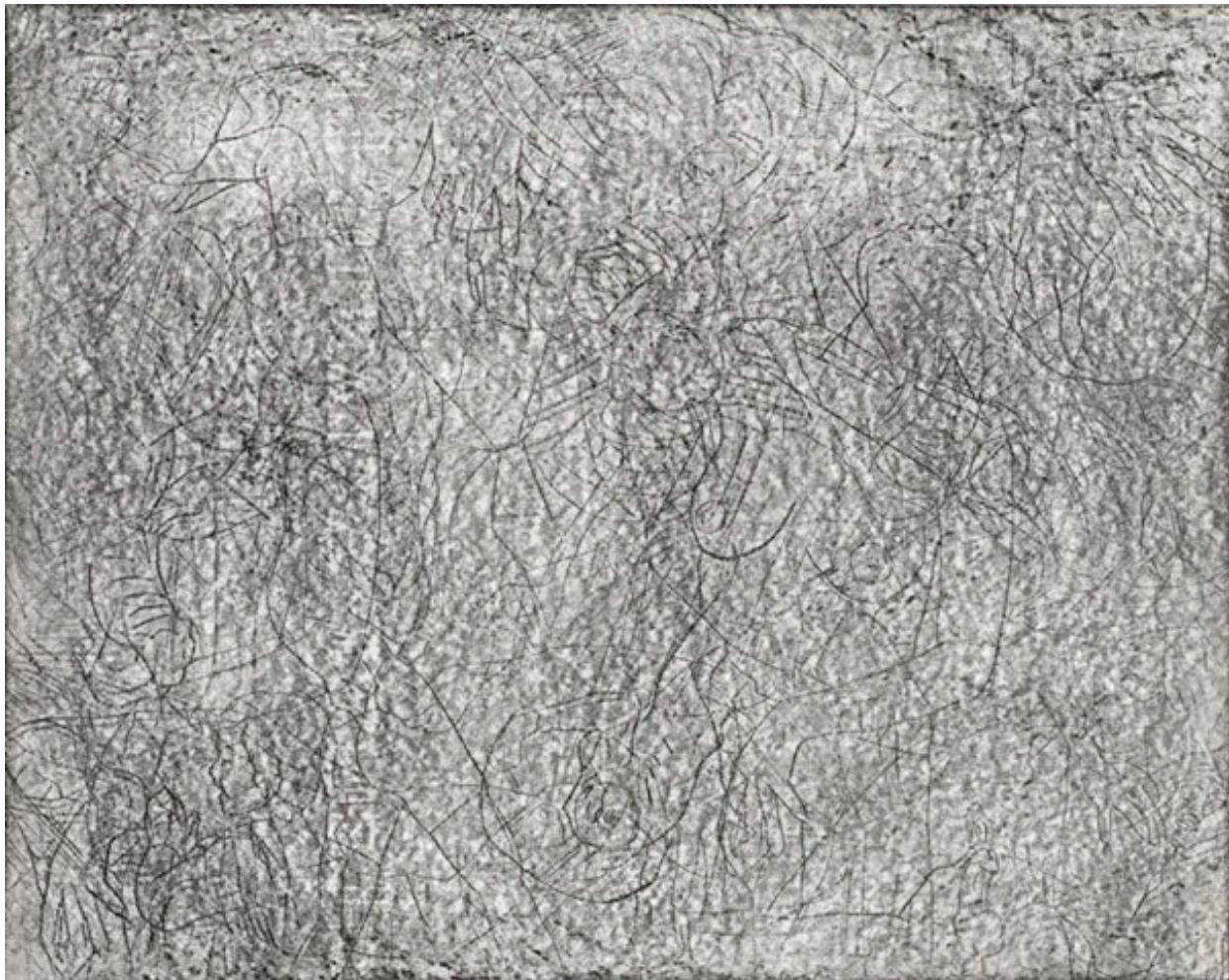# 2015 Joseph Nechvatal interview with Thyrza Goodeve
published in the December/January 2015-2016 issue of *The Brooklyn Rail*

Joseph Nechvatal, *Uplifting* (1983). Graphite on paper. 11 x14 inches.
Collection of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota.

THE MIGRANT AS CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

Joseph Nechvatal is a post-conceptual painter, media and audio artist, art theoretician, and the Paris correspondent for *Hyperallergic*. He came into prominence in the early '80s downtown New York art world for small, dense, semi-abstract, apocalyptic graphite drawings that were sometimes blown up photo-mechanically. In the late '70s and early '80s, he worked as the Dia archivist for La Monte Young; this Fluxus-inspired avant-garde tradition has permeated his theoretical and artistic work ever since. In the '80s, he was a member of Colab (Collaborative Projects) and helped establish the non-profit space ABC No Rio and *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine*. In 1986, he began to produce computer-assisted paintings, following the (so called) "death of painting." He received his Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and technology in 1999 under Roy Ascott at the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiiA) (now called the Planetary Collegium at Plymouth University, U.K.) where he developed his concept of *viractualism*, an approach that creates art interfaces between the virtual and the actual. He is the author of *Towards An Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality 1993 – 2006* (New York: Edgewise Books, 2009), and *Immersion Into Noise* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press,2011). In November, Thyrza Nichols Goodeve met Nechvatal on Ludlow street at his friend Seton Smith's loft to discuss his exhibition *Odyssey pandemOnium: a migrational metaphor* (November 15 – December 16, 2015) at Galerie Richard (121 Orchard Street) and the publication of his first book of poetry *Destroyer of Naivetés*. Although Ludlow Street had been Nechvatal's New York City home since 1980, he was evicted in 2012 and now lives in Paris.

*The paintings are filled with contorted calamities as the subtle lip between interior and exterior reveals a hint of aestheticized corporeal excess, which, in turn excites, if not detonates, an apotheosis of digestion. Such tantrums are beguiled by insolence. The unholy farthing reaps its vengeance by sustaining the omniscient cursor that moves unevenly throughout the incendiary birth of scented language.*1

—Robert C. Morgan

*He feels that our learning to self-modify (self-re-program) ourselves is the entire point of art.*2

—Yuting Zou

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (Rail): You arrived in New York City from Chicago in the mid '70s, lived in downtown New York through the '80s, started to commute back and forth to Paris in the '90s, and now, having been kicked out of your apartment on Ludlow Street, where you had been since 1980, live in Paris full time.

There are a number of fictional books out now about New York in the '70s, like *City on Fire* by Garth Risk Hallberg or *The Flamethrowers* by Rachel Kushner. So, why not start with what the '70s were like for you?

Joseph Nechvatal: At the time, I remember thinking that the disco mid '70s really sucked compared to the rocking Woodstock non-profit head space of the late '60s. But the rent was cheap, and that was key. I moved to 18 North Moore Street in Tribeca in 1975, into a storefront studio that cost sixty dollars a month and been Fluxus artist Joe Jones's *Music-Store*. I immediately started going to museums and galleries and The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, but at first I mostly hung out with musicians and filmmakers in Tribeca, like James Nares, Eric Mitchell, and Amos Poe—people that would help shape the No Wave movement. I started going every night to the Mudd Club and Tier 3 to hear No Wave bands like Theoretical Girls, DNA, and James Chance and the Contortions, and painting and drawing during the day. Artistically, the scene was poised at the end of Conceptualism, at the end of modernism, with artists such as Carl Andre, Mel Bochner and Donald Judd at their reductive zenith. It felt like a moment of artistic climax for reduction in both painting, with Robert Ryman, and in Minimal music, with Philip Glass. Modern art had reached an apex end point. So the question was where to go after that.

Rail: So where did you go? Was there a catalyst?

Nechvatal: Yes, I was particularly influenced by the No Wave performer Boris Policeband in 1978 at a concert to benefit Colab's *X Motion Picture Magazine*. I was entranced with how Policeband appropriated police scanner radio transmissions and merged them with his dissonant violin and hilarious voice. His brand of post-Minimalism had an influence on my striving for my own form of post-minimal art as chaos magic, based on magical gazing. That year I had been reading Aleister Crowley's book *Magick in Theory and Practice*. What I conjectured from Crowley

3

while listening to and watching Boris Policeband, was that a noisy aesthetic visualization process could be used to create feedback optic stimulus to the neocortex in a kind of "cop free" project of foreseeing—an attempt to scan into an un-policed future—based roughly on the basis of magical gazing. I had been doing rather minimalistic paintings then, but I eventually dropped painting and started making all-gray minimal graphite drawings that actually had a ton of stuff buried in them. So I flipped the art history script a bit, moving my art from reduction into glazed overload.

Rail: I've never heard of "chaos magic" before, or your influence by Aleister Crowley. Is "chaos magic" your own term? It sounds like a phrase that's applicable to your theoretical writing on noise.

Nechvatal: Yes, but as a concept, "chaos magic" only worked on a very intimate, personal scale in my own head! I learned about the term from studying the artist and magician Austin Osman Spare who I discovered in a magic-book store in the Village around the same time I was into Crowley. I write about Spare and chaos magic in my book *Immersion Into Noise*.

Rail: When was your first New York show?

Nechvatal: It was a DIY affair in 1979, called *Methadone Median*. I did it while squatting in an abandoned methadone center on west Canal Street, in Laurie Anderson's building. The space was haunted with emotion. It had been recently painted in various bright colors, but it was never used. I put some small paper pieces on the walls and served cheap white wine in the little meth plastic cups that were left behind. That is where I first met some of the Colab people, like Alan Moore, Becky Howland, Joe Lewis, Kiki Smith, and Tom Otterness. They, and many others, did the *Times Square Show*, and then the *Real Estate Show*. I joined in with the *Times Square Show* action at the last moment with a little drawing and was

very involved with the *Real Estate Show*. My association with Colab stimulated me to introduce anti-nuclear bomb politics into my art.

Rail: Whereas before the work had been more abstract? Weren't you even doing white paintings?

Nechvatal: I started to do mostly white paintings with simple shapes around 1976 for a few years, partly because I was studying Ludwig Wittgenstein's picture theory in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with Arthur Danto at Columbia. Also I admired some of the New Image Painting going on then, particularly that of Jennifer Bartlett, Neil Jenney, and Robert Moskowitz. I was trying to figure out how we recognize shapes that come towards us and shapes that go in—that kind of optical reading of reality. Wittgenstein's picture theory interested me because I had read that Jasper Johns was really interested in it, and I had been interested in Johns. And, happily, Danto was doing this course on Andy Warhol and Wittgenstein. It was extremely important to me in terms of seeing representation in a new light. Just before that I was making combine pieces using wood and stone in relationship to a white painted field. I remember I was using a lot of white oil stick at the time to get a physical, textured surface that became a kind of a representation of white noise. I eventually dropped that and started making small, gray, dense graphite drawings based on pictures in magazines and newspapers. This appropriation of media images was in the wind. But I used appropriation differently than people like Richard Prince or Sherrie Levine. They just moved the context of the image. I used appropriation as a starting point, not an end point. I would start by drawing cliché images from the clippings I collected, and then build a deep palimpsest drawing field using one image piled on another to the point of excess. I became very interested in excess in terms of the nuclear buildup going on then under Reagan, but also the excess typical of the popular distribution of electronic media. In the early 1980s, I, along with many other artists, was interested in the distributive

5

capacity of art based in reproduction. Most were inspired by the 1968 essay "The Dematerialization of Art" by John Chandler and Lucy R. Lippard, which argued that Conceptualism had a politically transformative aspect to be delved into. The other inescapable text at the time was Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Well-known practitioners of this art-and-reproduction fusion were Colab member Jenny Holzer and Colab associate Barbara Kruger; I was inspired by both of them. At the time, I was photo-mechanically blowing up my small drawings, making Xerox books, audio art, and street posters. Colab was interested in Fluxus-like low-priced multiples, and Colab first funded my audio cassette publishing and mail distribution network *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine*. A post-punk sense of underground distribution that used media against itself was very much in the air.

Rail: When did you begin to work with computers and the theoretical issues of the *viractual*?3

Nechvatal: My interest in the ideology of media led me to using the possibilities of computer-robotics as a timely alternative art tool, a new way to make conceptual paintings that addressed issues of distribution through excess. There were no PCs then, of course, this was 1986. But the studio I was working with in Midtown had access to a big computer painting machine that had been developed in Japan. So I started making computer-robotic assisted paintings like *The Informed Man*, and that led me to *Documenta 8* in 1987, and things took off from there. I was participating in the Brooke Alexander Gallery scene that included numerous Colab artists like Judy Rifka and John Ahearn, and my solo gallery career was pretty much launched out of there. But I was still playing around with writing poetry and art theory essays and making noise music.

Rail: So your interest in noise and music goes way back—were you ever in a

band?

Nechvatal: Music has always been a passion of mine. When I was sixteen, I was a drummer in a band at Hinsdale High School in Chicago called The Men, which is so pathetic because we weren't even men yet! I recall that we used to play a version of Cream's "Tales of Brave Ulysses." I continued to play drums and guitar throughout my college days, but I abandoned music as a professional goal. I never lost the desire to make, collect, distribute, and consume music, though. I love noise music the most these days.

Rail: Although you are in New York for the opening of your exhibition *Odyssey pandemOnium : a migrational metaphor*, you are not just a visual artist, but a theoretician,4 critic for *Hyperallergic*,5 audio-artist,6 and the current exhibition coincides with the publication of your poetry book *Destroyer of Naivetés* published by Punctum Books.7 Yet even this poetry book comes with a soundtrack.

Nechvatal: *Destroyer of Naivetés* is something I've been writing, bit by bit, for twenty years. It's an epic sex-farce poem broken into nine sections. After I finished writing it, I showed it to my friend, the composer Rhys Chatham, with whom I had worked on an '80s No Wave opera called *XS*, and more recently on an animation installation called *Viral Venture* that we showed on the large screen at the School of Visual Arts' Beatrice Theatre in 2011. I asked him to consider it for a recording project. The first thing he said was, "We have to find someone really good to do the voice," so I showed it to the spoken-word artist Black Sifichi, who also lives in Paris, and he agreed to do it. Black and I then handed the reading track to Rhys who created an intensely rich and beautiful soundscape underneath it, using flutes, trumpets, and electric guitars. We are looking for a gutsy publisher for the hour-long CD now. I played the recording at my Punctum book signing event, rather than reading some of it out loud.

The poetry in *Destroyer of Naivetés* is very flamboyant. I took liberties. I wanted to explore a vocabulary that is anti-banal and much more like that of Jean Genet. It's about the flamboyance of human sexual desire and the role the eye plays in our time of virtual reality. It takes inspiration from the books of Genet and many other sex writers, but also from Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, the drawings of Hans Bellmer, the film/performances of Bradley Eros, and Francis Picabia's book of poems *I Am a Beautiful Monster*.

Rail: You describe Rhys Chatham's soundscape for it as "beautiful." How does this relate to your work and interest in noise?8

Nechvatal: My art, whether it is visual, as in the new paintings in *Odyssey pandemOnium*, or audio, as in my *viral symphOny*, asks for time and effort on the part of the viewer or listener. It is anti-pop in that respect. It is not about easy consumption. But you're right, if there is anything that ties it together, it is my interest in the beauty of the art of noise, particularly the idea that if you took time and looked into a vague field, you could discover layers of subliminal imagery. This is as true of the imagery I produced for my show at Galerie Richard as it is of my graphite palimpsest drawings from the '80s. The paintings in *Odyssey pandemOnium* are conceptually situated within my immersive noise theory in that they make use of a complicated turmoil produced from close exchanges within figure/ground relationships that challenges us to think outside of the normal system of human perception. Classical-looking figures are embedded into a complex and subtle ground so that the normal figure/ground relationship more or less merges. The viewer's eye must navigate the visual pandemonium in a way that suggests Odysseus's wanderings.

Rail: What is noise to you?

Nechvatal: In everyday use, the word "noise" means unwanted sound or noise pollution. I look at it and listen to it differently: from an immersive perspective. In music, dissonance is the quality of sounds that seem *unstable*, with an aural "need" to "resolve" to a "stable" consonance. Despite the fact that words like "unpleasant" and "grating" are often used to describe the sound of harsh dissonance, in fact all music with a harmonic or tonal basis—even music that is perceived as generally harmonious—incorporates some degree of dissonance. The enigma of noise is what interests me.

Rail: But it's beyond enigma for you—in other words, it's not just noise as some punk modernist irritant or disjunction meant to fuck with people. Noise is an avenue to a higher level of consciousness for you, isn't it? In her review of your book *Immersion Into Noise*, published in the *Brooklyn Rail* in 2012, when it came out with Open Humanities Press, Yuting Zou said, "the function of an 'immersive art-of-noise' is to provide us with an artistic environment of clamorous cultural information capable of expanding our consciousness, *disjunctively* [. . .] disjunctive noise consciousness may lead to a new ontological unification based in 'self-re-programmablity.'"9 This is important and complex. Can you elaborate?

Nechvatal: The art of noise is the sensitive use of what Duchamp called the essential element in his art: delay. Noise, in the visual sense, is a delay in perceiving signals, and that delay offers up opportunity for the viewer to fill in her own phantasmagorical content. That puts the imagination to work; if used often enough, imagination can aid in a beneficial transformation of the self.

Rail: The addition of the word "immersion" is also important. Your collection of essays published by Edgewise Press in 2009 is called *Towards an Immersive Intelligence* and immersion is something you have been writing about since your doctoral dissertation. I now understand the connection in a way I didn't before: with noise,

one is immersed to the point of losing one's perceptual anchors—there is no up-down, left-right—whether it is visual or audio noise.

Nechvatal: Yes. Think of noise as a suspension of clear location. That is how the art of noise is so central to getting what I am doing with the virus and the image as host in the *Odyssey pandemOnium* paintings—and how it relates to the migration crises happening in Europe due to the wars that started with Bush's stupid invasion. *Odyssey pandemOnium* refers to that homeless situation and the natural yearning to return to one's home and one's language. This pertains to me also as I am coming home, with an epic poem in hand, to the Lower East Side, after being expelled by the gentrification war on artists that went down here.

Rail: Do you have your notebook with you? Could you read what you read about noise at the Punctum symposium, *In Service to Nothing: Intellectual Inquiry in the Open*, at The New School?

Nechvatal: "The art of noise today is a psychotic outburst that disrupts smooth image operations with an explosion of buried visual hysteria that echoes our highly diverse chaotic world. Its incomprehensibility by design connects us to the world media frenzy through what I think to be a type of chaos magic. The art of noise creates the visualization bridge between form and intuition, as its uncertain images have more information in them than a clear, certain image (or sound) where the information quickly becomes redundant. Thus the art of noise gives rise to new thought. It promotes the emergence of new forms of an old story: art."

Rail: This also reminds me of your idea that art in itself is immersive: "Therefore, the role of immersive art remains the prosthetic task of artificially facilitating such an unrestricted state, as such, it remains associated with the most fleeting elaborations of artistic consciousness."10 How does the use of the computer virus

connect to noise?

Nechvatal: In 1990, my *Computer Virus Project*'s initial goal was to produce physical paintings by using algorithms implementing "viral" processes. It's based on a simulation tool which allowed me to virtually introduce artificial organisms into a digitized reproduction of an earlier artwork, the host, and let them transform and destroy that original image. During these "attacks" a new still image can be extracted and painted on canvas, which is a way to realize them—to bring back the virtual into the real.

Rail: The context of the '80s is crucial here—not only all the theorizing at the time around the real, the simulated, and what you call *viractual*, but AIDS.

Nechvatal: I attribute the birth of the *Computer Virus Project* to my direct experience with, and exposure to, the deadly virus through my relationship to the tormenting AIDS death of Bebe Smith, Seton Smith's twin. That and the AIDS death I witnessed of my friend and neighbor, the Pyramid Club performer Tron von Hollywood. That period cracked open an emotional range in me between dread for one's life and happy memories of a fading wild sexual freedom. The negative connotations of the HIV virus as a vector of disease is reflected in the principle of degradation of the image. But here, the virus is also the basis of a creative process, producing newness in reference to the major influence of the virus on evolution in biological systems. In the current work *Odyssey pandemOnium* you can see the virus weave and unweave figures within the ground. Also you can see the way I put William S. Burroughs's 1971 text *Electronic Revolution*, where he talks about the virus as the beginning of language, through a computer program that connects his word "virus" into a frequency relationship flow chart with other key words. But my virus project's full aesthetic function in terms of painting is achieved by writing a dynamic mechanism for automatically evolving the code typical of genetic

algorithms. This chance-based intertwining activity is itself an example of my theory of subliminal noise painting with its deep connection to John Cage's chance-based art.

Joseph Nechvatal, *drifting telemachus* (2014).
Computer-robotic assisted acrylic on velour canvas.
42 x66 inches.

Rail: Why call them paintings?

Nechvatal: Because they are one-of-a-kind painted canvases that have been airbrush spray painted through a computer-robotic driven mechanism. Of course this calls for an expanded definition of the craft of hand painting, one connected to Minimalist art fabrication techniques and also Fluxus-like Conceptualism. They are post-Conceptual paintings that build upon the legacy of Conceptual art, where the concept or idea involved in the work takes some precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. Conceptual art focused attention on the idea behind the art object and questioned the traditional role of that object as conveyor of meaning. Subsequently, those theories cast doubt upon the necessity of materiality itself, as conceptual artists de-materialized the post-Minimal art object and began to produce time-based and ephemeral artworks. Although total dematerialization of the art object never occurred, the art object became flexible, and that malleability, coupled with viral computer processing, has resulted in post-Conceptual painting.

Rail: So the virus is wandering around and living off one of your host art images in *Odyssey pandemOnium*, creating new painterly situations much like the notion of wandering in Homer's *Odyssey*?

Nechvatal: Yes. I had been kicking around a copy of *The Odyssey* since the time I migrated to New York City and it is one of the books I took with me when I moved to Paris a few years ago. I've read this Penguin version three times, at least—there are certain phrases I like to remember, like "struggle with the sea" and stuff about the Lotus Eaters. Now the paintings of *Odyssey pandemOnium* are not illustrations of

the *Odyssey*. As mentioned above, what is important is intentional enigma. The paintings need to be both seductive and obscure to the degree that their codes cannot be immediately discerned. I think that the phantasmagorical obscurity, the mystery of the *Odyssey pandemOnium* paintings, is increasingly desirable in a world that has become increasingly data-mined, mapped, quantified, specialized, and identified in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way. My goal is to disrupt instrumental logic and contradict, counteract, and cancel out false reason and hollow feeling. Suffering and joy, like figure and ground, are tied together in frenzy, neither one without the other. Thus works in *Odyssey pandemOnium* may suggest or produce stress in us. One might even say an anxiety of disintegration. Dedication to its merits, if there are any, might well be described as vaguely heroic when experienced as a lost lyric poet. They take off from the poetic idea of imagery floating free on the internet. Everything is mobile and floating around now. Add that to the plight of the migrants escaping war by entering Greece by sea, near where the *Odyssey* is set. Overloaded boats regularly capsize, drowning hundreds of people. In September, I showed a virus projection called *viral castratO* at the Budapest Art Factory during the crises in the train station there and spoke to people about the situation. I was thinking about this a great deal when I was there and now again as Paris, a city I love, has become a zone of killing and conflict. Desperate people fleeing Syria and other areas of conflict, these migrants flowing across Europe, scaring the hell out of many Europeans and fueling the rise of the far-right anti-immigrant political forces. And I saw the sad heroism of the migrant act, which is actually an act of conscientious objection opposed to war. They are fleeing war, whereas Odysseus was a war hero. I wanted to flip that classical Greek script of Homer's and give it a new interpretation in light of our actual lived situation.

Rail: In the news, the route the migrants take keeps changing, which makes your allusion to the *Odyssey* that much more poignant, although from the opposite end.

Nechvatal: *The Odyssey* is about the King-hero conqueror trying to get back home. These people are the conscientious objectors to war. They're fleeing the war, fleeing Syria, fleeing the combat zone, so in these paintings I wanted to give them hero status by making Odysseus and his story the host in which their viral travels may wander.

Endnotes

Robert C. Morgan, "Joseph Nechvatal's 'nOise anusmOs,'" *Brooklyn Rail*, July 4, 2012.

Yuting Zou, "Nechvatal's Immersive Noise Theory," by Yuting Zou, *Brooklyn Rail*, April 11, 2011.

According to Nechvatal, with the increased use of micro-electronics, the virtual now co-exists with the actual (thus the term *viractual*). Christiane Paul, in her seminal book *Digital Art*, discusses Nechvatal's concept of *viractualism* (58). One of the images she chooses to illustrate that section of the book is his painting *the birth Of the viractual* (2001). Joe Lewis, in the March 2003 issue of *Art in America* (123 − 124), discusses the viractual in his review *Joseph Nechvatal at Universal Concepts Unlimited*. Frank Popper also writes about the viractual concept in his book *From Technological to Virtual Art* (122).

Towards An Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality 1993 − 2006 (New York: Edgewise Books, 2009).

Hyperallergic.com.

viral symphOny.

Destroyer of Naivetés.

Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersion Into Noise*. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

"Nechvatal's Immersive Noise Theory," by Yuting Zou, *Brooklyn Rail*, April 11, 2011.

pp. 24 − 25.

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve
THYRZA NICHOLS GOODEVE is a writer living in New York. She received her PhD from the University of California in Santa Cruz under Donna Haraway and James Clifford. She is faculty and thesis director of the MFA in Art Practice at the School of Visual Arts, and Program Coordinator for the MICA summer intensive in DUMBO.